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# Revisiting History

**Abstract:** The past few years have witnessed a renewed interest in vintage and vernacular photography and photographic archives in general. This increase in attention is clearly reflected within the arts. More and more photographers/artists blend their own creations with existing photographs or use vintage photography and old techniques as a basis for new works of art. This article highlights some of the finest examples of this artistic practice, by artists such as Mark Klett, Simon Norfolk, Shimon Attie, Sally Mann and Broomberg and Chanarin. Each one of them, in his or her own way, revisits history using early photography as a point of access.

In 1878 John Burke, an Irish photographer based in India, accompanied British army forces during an invasion in Afghanistan. There he produced a small number of albums with prints to be sold to the general public in his studio in India. These images are the first photos produced in Afghanistan known to date.

In 2001 Simon Norfolk (UK) went to Afghanistan and produced the highly acclaimed photo book *Chronotopia* (Dewi Lewis, 2002). Inspired by romantic paintings of the 18th century with their golden lights, Norfolk explored the aftermath of the conflicts that struck Afghanistan the past decades. The images, shot in yellowish, warm light, hint at an Afghanistan that is at the close of one thing and at a beginning of something new. Norfolk, disappointed in the continuation of the war in Afghanistan in the following years, sought a point of departure to return and produce a new body of work. When Brian Liddy, curator at the National Media Museum in Bradford, showed Norfolk a Burke album, he knew he had found it. Seeing history repeating itself, Norfolk set out to Afghanistan to photograph in the spirit of John Burke: what would John Burke have shot if he had lived today?

While the Burke + Norfolk project can be considered in some ways as a re-photography project, it is not as strictly fitting this idiom as the Rephotography Survey Project (RSP). Within the RSP, 19th century US military and geological survey photographs are paired with contemporary views from exactly the same points of view (vantage points), revealing how the site is now as opposed to how it was. Originally, the project ran from 1977 till 1979, culminating in a monumental publication: *Second View* (University of New Mexico Press, 1984). In 2004 *Third Views, Second Sights* (Museum of New Mexico Press) appeared, updating some of the views. Mark Klett, Ellen Manchester and JoAnn Verburg set up the original project. Over 120 19th century photographs - mainly images by Timothy O'Sullivan and William Henry Jackson - were repeated by the RSP. The project had a scientific approach, trying to match the original image as closely as possible. JoAnn Verburg in her preface says: *Unlike our predecessors, we did not take what we thought would be appealing shots. Instead we did a survey of a survey*.

The project, as a concept very simple, turned out to be very challenging from a technical point of view: finding the exact locations, the identical vantage points,

duplicating the camera movements, time of exposure, lighting differences, etc. Comparing the original survey photographers' view to the actual site was by far the most provocative aspect of the fieldwork – firstly, because it was a shock for the team to learn that places often didn't look like the pictures at all; secondly, because it became clear what had been included in the frame and what was left out; and thirdly, because it turned out to be a unique way to experience the passing of a hundred-year period.

Considered as neutral images and faithful representations made during scientific surveys, remaking 19th century images has taught the RSP a lot about the personal preferences and individual decisions of the early photographers. Jackson for instance, seems to have liked standing on the same level or higher than his subject, looking for the best general view. O'Sullivan was less predictable, photographing the same subjects from multiple viewpoints, often with a reference of (human) scale. Both photographers preferred working with a wide-angle lens. O'Sullivan almost always corrected perspective through tilt and shift, Jackson much less. Whether this was due to the fact that they used different equipment is not known. Particularly in cases where both photographers shot the same view or subject, these differences in style become very apparent.

Simon Norfolk on the other hand, did not aim at rephotographing the views and subjects, but at matching the spirit in which John Burke took his images. Early photography was a very costly affair and mostly institutionalized. Snapshot photography as we know it today did not exist.

Burke is a very complete photographer, shooting landscapes, (group) portraits, news and events. His images are quite lyrical and emotional. This might be explained by the fact that his trip to Afghanistan was a commercial undertaking, and that his images and albums were intended to be sold as souvenirs to soldiers, officers, etc. This also partly explains why no battles or aftermaths of fighting scenes are depicted, even though they were taken on a military campaign of the British Army: such images have no commercial value. Burke's background also comes into play: he was an Irishmen, a Catholic, with no formal training. Working for the British army thus makes him somewhat of a bystander.

Norfolk shoots the same types of subjects as Burke: portraits, city views and military installations. The latter two are presented in colour, the portraits in black and white. Throughout the book and exhibition, Norfolk's images are mixed with Burke's to form one body of work. Contrary to the RSP, where the differences between the two views are at the centre of attention, the Burke + Norfolk project highlights analogies and similarities: here, history is clearly repeating itself, over a time lapse of 130 years.

Mixing history and present is also the scope of the very powerful project *Writing on the Wall* (1991-1993) by Shimon Attie (USA). Attie, living in Berlin at that time, was haunted by the lack of signs of Jewish history. He took slides of black and white archive images (1920s and 1930s) of Berlin's Jewish inhabitants and projected them during night time onto the façade of buildings in the Scheunenviertel district. Whenever possible, he projected the images at the exact location where they had been taken. Superimposing image and reality recreates a past time, thereby confronting past

and present. The images evoke ghosts of traditions and people, and, on the other hand, the memory of a modern catastrophe: a confrontation of photography and history. The images are a construction and an evocation of a long lost past – not a representation of reality, as priority is given to imagination over historical factuality. Most of the projections on the walls depict shops, people working and walking, daily life. The images of the projections *in situ* are, in contrast, very colourful. The black and white projections act as cracks on the wall, or as a fracture in time. Possible interpretations of the work are infinite. The context continually changes over time, in reality - as Berlin has changed and continues to change rapidly - but within the work as well. As a result of this nonstop variation, the images are extremely layered and significance is shifting constantly.

Haunting, too, is the work of Sally Mann. She doesn't use archival material to evoke the past in a strict sense, but uses the wet-collodion process to photograph the battlefields of the American Civil War. The same photographic process was used by Alexander Gardner to document the war in the 19th century. These images don't offer a window to the world, but attempt to evoke the past. The landscapes are desolate and dark, inhabited by silhouettes of trees and bushes, as if time is halted. This impression is enhanced by technical imperfections and by the cracks, dust and dirt on the surface of the image. It is as if these images have been made and buried together with the soldiers during the Civil War and have been unearthed only recently. This is complete contrary to the technical perfection of the images made today with digital cameras. In an interview, Mann states she hopes she won't ever master the technique of wet collodion, as these technical imperfections are an integral part of the image. The same imperfections point to the early days of photography, experimenting with various techniques. Mann's images refer to themes such as violence, war, or - on a broader plane - history. Although lacking human presence and not recording historical events, the atmosphere, the cracks, the tonality make them so much the more powerful.

The past few years several seminal books have been published mixing vernacular or found photography with personal work to (re)create a new story or history. One of the first books receiving critical acclaim was *The Mushroom Collector* by Jason Fulford; mixing found photos of mushrooms with texts and his own work. Most noteworthy is the publication *Redheaded Peckerwood* by Christian Patterson, a personal story following the steps of Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate during their three-day killing spree across Nebraska and Wyoming (USA). It plays with pre-existing archive material, mixing fact and fiction, past and present, presentation and representation.

As a final example I want to highlight the work of Broomberg and Chanarin. In 2011 they published *People in trouble laughing pushed to the ground*. The work is based on the *Belfast Exposed* archive. This community photography archive, comprising more than half a million images taken by amateurs and professionals, covers the Troubles in Northern Ireland, as seen by the people most affected. Until 2003 the archive was uncategorized and open to the public. As a result, the contact sheets have been tampered with dots and stickers to indicate selected photographs or to hide them from public record. In the aforementioned book, about 200 circular images were published, revealing the fragments of the photographs that were revealed while peeling away these dots. Throughout, or in spite of, the randomness of the selection - covering a broad array of scenes, from people walking on the street to political protest

and riots - it shows a strange, decontextualized, intriguing cross-section of everyday life in Northern Ireland, based on a specific archive.
A second project using vernacular photography is *The Holy Bible* (2013). At first glance, the book looks like a normal bible; but the inside reveals the text that is overlaid with images referring to underlined text or words. The criterion for selecting the images was based on the thesis of the radical Jewish philosopher Adi Opir: *Right from the start, almost every appearance he made was catastrophic […] Catastrophe is his means of operation, and his central instrument of governance*. It draws a parallel between the violence of the Bible and the violence of the modern state. The images were selected from the Archive of Modern Conflict, a London based private photographic archive, housing about 4 million images on the history of violence and war.

A highly conceptual book, this publication may be perceived as being very provocative and problematic as it recontexualizes the Bible with images. As Chanarin says: *The book includes some images that are undoubtedly violent and shocking. We did debate whether or not to shy away from these images, but, after all, they exist within the archive and elsewhere, even if we don't want to look at them.[ …] In fact, our illustrated bible is broadly about photography and its preoccupation with catastrophe*.

Photography not only enables imagining the world, but also (re)organizing it. It allows for infinitely varied compilations and juxtapositions. Working with archives allows for the construction of new types of relations or realities and for the creation of new kinds of visual experiences. Due to the nature of archival material, it has the ability to alter the meaning of images. The examples above show the richness of methods and results of photographers/artists using or implementing archives within their own body of work. Whether an exact copy (Klett), rephotography matching the spirit of the original (Norfolk), layering past and present (Attie), interpretation (Mann) or a juxtaposition of meaning and image (Broomberg and Chanarin): these bodies of work would not have been possible without archives and, more importantly, without a personal reading of the archival material. From that point on, the existing photos serve as a gateway to revisit history.

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